

Research article

Hiking as soft adventure tourism in South Africa: Insights from a systematised literature review

Ngcobile M. Nkambule ¹ and Dewald Venter* ¹

¹ Department of Tourism and Integrated Communication, Vaal University of Technology, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This study investigates hiking as a form of soft adventure tourism within the South African context, highlighting its potential as a sustainable, inclusive, and experience-driven sub-niche. Soft adventure activities such as hiking are characterised by low physical risk, minimal technical requirements, and broad accessibility, appealing to environmentally conscious and health-oriented travellers. Through a systematised literature review methodology, this study examines how hiking aligns with the principles of responsible tourism while contributing to rural development, environmental stewardship, and cultural preservation. Key South African trails, including those in the Drakensberg Mountains, Table Mountain, and the Otter Trail, are analysed for their recreational, educational, and socio-economic value. Findings indicate that hiking supports conservation and community-based tourism, though challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and limited trail accessibility persist. The study also identifies future opportunities shaped by trends in solo travel, wellness tourism, and digital innovation. Emphasising strategic trail management, community engagement, and sustainable development, the paper provides insights for tourism stakeholders seeking to position hiking as a transformative and resilient tourism product. By contextualising hiking within broader adventure tourism discourse, this study contributes to the understanding of how nature-based travel can promote both personal enrichment and regional development.

KEYWORDS

Hiking tourism; soft adventure tourism; sustainable tourism; South Africa; community-based tourism; nature-based travel

Introduction

Niche tourism refers to specialised segments of the tourism market that cater to specific interests, activities, or experiences, often distinguished by their unique appeal and targeted audiences (Gunn, 2020). As the global tourism landscape becomes increasingly diverse, niche forms such as ecotourism (Marasco & Marchi, 2025), adventure tourism (Mba et al., 2025), and cultural tourism (Matteucci et al., 2022) have grown in significance, owing to their potential to provide authentic, personalised, and sustainable travel experiences (Mishra, 2025). Among these, hiking has emerged as a significant form of soft adventure tourism, characterised by low risk, moderate physical activity, and an emphasis on engagement with nature and cultural discovery (Williams & Lew, 2021). Hiking, as a niche tourism activity, involves walking through natural landscapes along designated trails, offering opportunities for recreation, environmental appreciation, and cultural engagement (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). Within this broader category, the sub-niche of eco-hiking and trail tourism emphasises sustainable interaction with nature, with a focus on conservation, education, and community involvement (Baldwin et al., 2020). These sub-niches appeal to travellers seeking meaningful outdoor experiences that foster environmental awareness while supporting local economies (Kozak & Baloglu, 2020). South Africa's rich biodiversity, varied landscapes, and cultural heritage significantly enhance the appeal of hiking within this context (Steyn et al., 2021). Investigating hiking as a

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S CONTACT: Dewald Venter ✉ dewald@vut.ac.za

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niche tourism activity in South Africa is particularly important given its potential to promote sustainable development and uplift rural livelihoods. The country boasts more than 1 500 officially recognised hiking trails, ranging from short urban walks to multi-day mountain expeditions (South African National Parks, 2022). These trails traverse national parks, private reserves, and community-managed areas, offering opportunities for both casual hikers and experienced trekkers (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). South Africa's diverse terrain, including the Drakensberg Mountains, Table Mountain, and the Garden Route, provides a broad array of hiking experiences, attracting a wide demographic of tourists (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022).

Despite the increasing popularity of hiking, a deeper understanding of its role in South Africa's tourism landscape remains necessary, particularly regarding sustainability, community engagement, and destination development (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Exploring this niche can offer valuable insights into how hiking fosters environmentally responsible tourism, facilitates cultural exchange, and generates economic benefits for local communities. Moreover, analysing existing literature helps identify key gaps concerning trail management, visitor safety, and overall experience quality factors crucial to the sustainable growth of hiking tourism (Mokhele & Sibanda, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reshaped tourism behaviours by accelerating the demand for nature-based, low-contact activities such as hiking (Anzman-Frasca et al., 2023; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). The latter reinforced the relevance of soft adventure tourism as a method to improve physical and psychological well-being during periods of restricted mobility (Anzman-Frasca et al., 2023), as well as increased interest in local and regional nature-based travel (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2021).

Methodology

This study adopts a systematised literature review approach to synthesise and critically evaluate existing scholarly and contextual knowledge on hiking as a form of soft adventure tourism within the South African context. Systematised reviews apply a structured and transparent search and selection process akin to systematic reviews, while allowing greater flexibility in scope definition, source types, and quality appraisal to accommodate practical constraints and applied tourism contexts (Alves & Luque-Gil, 2025). The review process was guided by clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure rigour and relevance, with provisions for including select non-journal sources (e.g., book chapters, organisational reports, and grey literature) where these provide essential South Africa-specific data, policy insights, or foundational conceptual discussions not fully represented in peer-reviewed journals. Searches were conducted systematically across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost. A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used, including "hiking tourism", "soft adventure tourism", "adventure tourism South Africa", "nature-based tourism", "trail tourism", "sustainable tourism South Africa", "community-based tourism", and "eco-hiking", with searches primarily restricted to publications in English from 2020 onwards to capture recent developments, particularly post-COVID shifts in tourism behaviour. Supplementary targeted searches were performed for South African-specific grey literature and reports (e.g., via organisational websites and Google Scholar) to identify relevant non-journal materials.

Inclusion criteria required sources to be published from 2020 onwards, in English, and focused on hiking or soft adventure tourism either in South Africa or in comparable international nature-based tourism contexts. Eligible sources addressed at least one of the following themes: tourist motivations, trail management practices, sustainability and environmental impacts, socio-economic contributions, community engagement, or emerging trends in soft adventure activities. Peer-reviewed journal articles formed the core of the review; however, select book chapters, organisational reports (e.g., annual reports from conservation authorities), and grey literature were included if they offered unique, credible, and directly relevant data or insights (e.g., official trail statistics or policy contexts in South Africa) that complemented journal findings and addressed gaps in peer-reviewed coverage. Publications were excluded if they were published before 2020 (except in rare, justified cases for foundational concepts), were not in English, focused on unrelated tourism segments (e.g., hard adventure, mass tourism), or fell outside the scope of hiking and soft adventure experiences without adding substantive value. Non-peer-reviewed sources were limited and critically appraised for relevance and reliability during selection. Following initial keyword searches, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, after which full texts (or equivalent documents) of potentially eligible sources were retrieved and reviewed in detail against the inclusion criteria. Approximately 130 publications were initially identified, of which 68 were retained for final inclusion after full-text screening, removal of duplicates, and selective incorporation of non-journal materials. The selected literature was then subjected to thematic analysis to identify and organise recurring themes, including the conceptual positioning of hiking within niche and adventure tourism, motivational frameworks, documented benefits (educational, health,

cultural, economic, and environmental), persistent challenges (infrastructure, safety, degradation, climate vulnerability), South African trail examples, and future opportunities shaped by wellness, technology, and sustainability trends. An ethical waiver (FREC/HS/30/05/2025/6.3.1) was granted for this study by the Human Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee of the Vaal University of Technology, as no primary data collection involving human participants was undertaken. This structured yet flexible approach enables a comprehensive synthesis of recent scholarship and contextual sources while highlighting gaps and implications specific to positioning hiking as a sustainable soft adventure tourism product in South Africa, in alignment with broader global trends toward experience-driven and responsible travel in adventure contexts (Harrison & Dore, 2022).

Literature review

Niche tourism

Niche tourism is a specialised segment of the broader tourism industry, defined by its focus on specific interests, activities, or experiences tailored to particular market segments (Gunn, 2020). Scholars argue that niche tourism is largely driven by travellers' desires for deeper engagement, cultural authenticity, and environmental responsibility (Williams & Lew, 2021). As a result, the concept has expanded to encompass a diverse range of activities, including ecotourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and wellness tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). The evolution of niche tourism globally has been shaped by shifting consumer preferences and broader socio-economic trends (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). In recent years, there has been a marked shift towards more experiential, sustainable, and ethically conscious travel, which has accelerated the development of niche markets (Ateljevic, 2020; Dolynska et al., 2023; Seeler et al., 2021). Technological advances and improved access to information have empowered travellers to actively seek out experiences that align with their values and interests (Kozak & Baloglu, 2020). Furthermore, the rise of social media has played a critical role in promoting niche tourism, as travellers share unique experiences and influence others to pursue similar activities (Harrison & Dore, 2022). The concept of niche tourism has also broadened to include emerging segments such as voluntourism, rural tourism, and health and wellness tourism, reflecting the diversification of traveller motivations (Mokhele & Sibanda, 2021). Scholars emphasise that niche tourism can contribute significantly to regional development, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation by promoting sustainable practices and encouraging community participation (Ndlovu et al., 2023). The growing emphasis on responsible tourism has reinforced the role of niche markets as effective vehicles for advancing conservation and delivering socio-economic benefits (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Recent research highlights demographic shifts that further influence niche tourism, such as increased participation from younger travellers and older adults seeking active, meaningful leisure pursuits (Baldwin et al., 2020). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped tourism priorities, prompting a greater focus on local, nature-based, and low-impact activities, thereby accelerating interest in niche experiences (Williams & Lew, 2021).

Adventure tourism

Adventure tourism, as a niche form of tourism, has experienced substantial growth in recent decades, driven by increasing demand for active, challenging, and experiential travel (Buckley, 2020). Its roots can be traced back to the mid-20th century, when explorers and mountaineers began seeking out remote and extreme environments for recreational purposes (Ewert & McDonald, 2021). Initially associated with pursuits such as hiking, trekking, and mountaineering, adventure tourism has since evolved to include a wide array of activities that blend physical exertion, perceived risk, and cultural engagement (Williams & Lew, 2021). Typically, adventure tourism is characterised by activities that involve some degree of risk, uncertainty, or physical challenge, often taking place in natural settings (Buckley, 2020). Scholars generally agree that what sets this form of tourism apart is its focus on thrill, challenge, and personal development (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). A growing body of literature (Asad, 2024; Chen & Rojniruttikul, 2025; Le, 2022; Sattar, 2024) further suggests that integrating environmental management practices such as green product innovation and sustainability strategies can enhance organisational competitiveness and long-term viability, especially when supported by transformational leadership and a culture of sustainability. However, the definition of adventure tourism remains a subject of ongoing academic debate, owing to its complex and multifaceted nature. While some scholars emphasise experiential and psychological dimensions, including perceived risk and personal achievement (Ewert & McDonald, 2021), others focus on the physical and environmental characteristics of the activity (Williams & Lew, 2021).

A common classification distinguishes between *soft* and *hard* adventure, reflecting the diversity of experiences within the sector (Chauke et al., 2024; Mba et al., 2025; Van Vuren, 2022). Soft adventure includes activities such as hiking and snorkelling, which are generally accessible, carry lower risk, and

require minimal specialised skills. In contrast, hard adventure entails more physically demanding and risky pursuits such as rock climbing or wilderness trekking. These often overlap with extreme sports and require higher levels of expertise and courage (Janowski et al., 2021; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2021). Although useful, this dichotomy has been criticised as overly simplistic. Recent research argues that such classifications fail to capture the full complexity of the adventure tourism experience (Janowski et al., 2021). Scholars such as Janowski et al. (2021) and Gross et al. (2023) have proposed a more nuanced framework, identifying key dimensions, including risk and danger, the natural environment, thrill and excitement, challenge, and physical activity. These elements collectively shape both the nature of activities and the motivations of participants. Furthermore, factors such as demographic background, personality traits, and individual preferences also influence whether travellers are more inclined towards soft or hard adventures (Gross et al., 2023; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2021). The boundaries between adventure tourism and related forms such as ecotourism or nature tourism are also often blurred, complicating attempts at a clear categorisation (Janowski et al., 2021). As the field continues to evolve, there is increasing recognition of the need for more dynamic typologies that account for hybrid experiences, product characteristics, and consumer motivations (Gross et al., 2023; Stanišić et al., 2024).

In addition to its recreational and psychological appeal, adventure tourism has significant economic, social, and environmental implications. The economic benefits are particularly evident in rural areas, where it supports employment, wages, tax revenue, and various local industries (Beckman et al., 2023). Destinations such as South Africa's Drakensberg and Nepal's Himalayas, for example, derive considerable local income from adventure-based travel (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Socially, adventure tourism fosters cultural exchange and community empowerment, especially when local residents are actively involved in planning and service delivery (Ndlovu et al., 2023). On an individual level, it can enhance personal growth, resilience, and confidence qualities aligned with the broader goals of transformative and experiential travel (Williams & Lew, 2021). Soft adventure activities, in particular, are more inclusive due to their lower physical and technical demands, making them accessible to a wider demographic.

Table 1: Recent academic studies (2020-2024) on environmental sustainability in South African adventure tourism

Study and year	Focus area	Sustainability insights
Giddy (2020)	Employment & regulation in Garden Route	Importance of environmental regulation and training for staff
Jong et al. (2022)	Climate impact on tourism demand	Carbon emissions negatively affect tourism; sustainability aids resilience
Kuseni & Hermann (2025)	Visitor compliance in national parks	Behavioural threats to environmental conservation
Matshusa et al. (2021)	Ecotourism governance in Kruger	Need for stakeholder coordination and resource stewardship

Responsible tourism practices are therefore critical. Scholars emphasise the need for clear safety protocols, educational initiatives, and regulatory oversight (Ewert et al., 2021). In high-risk environments, concerns about injury and liability underscore the importance of standardised safety procedures (Williams & Lew, 2021). One of the more contentious issues in adventure tourism is its increasing commodification. Nature-based activities are often packaged and sold as commercial products, raising concerns about authenticity, cultural integrity, and the erosion of local values. According to Gonçalves (2020) and Janowski et al. (2021), commodification can transform unique, place-based experiences into standardised offerings, prioritising thrill and spectacle over genuine engagement with nature and culture. Historical case studies, such as early Arctic tourism, reveal how adventure has been reframed as something to observe rather than experience, often facilitated by technology and luxury (Spring, 2020). Commercialisation also affects the professional sector, potentially narrowing the skill sets and motivations of guides, resulting in less inclusive and less authentic experiences (Carson et al., 2020). Furthermore, Gonçalves (2020) and Lindberg and Jensen (2020) argue that marketing adventure as a transformative or risky experience often reduces it to a transactional product, undermining its deeper cultural and personal dimensions.

It can be argued that such a trend carries broader implications such as over-commercialisation, which can strain ecosystems, dilute local traditions, and reduce meaningful interactions between tourists and host communities. Carson et al. (2020) and Janowski et al. (2021) advocate for sustainable management practices, community participation, and a focus on experiential integrity. They call for eco-centric and culturally respectful tourism models that prioritise conservation and local empowerment, ensuring that adventure tourism retains its distinctiveness and remains a responsible and enriching activity. Ultimately, the unchecked pursuit of profit risks compromising the very attributes that make adventure tourism valuable (Buckley, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reassessment of adventure tourism's resilience and adaptability (Mokhele & Sibanda, 2021). The crisis

highlighted the importance of diversification, robust health, safety protocols, and sustainable business models (Mokhele & Sibanda, 2021). In response, the sector has shown increased interest in local, nature-based experiences, demonstrating a capacity to adapt to shifting travel preferences and global disruptions (Williams & Lew, 2021).

Hiking

Hiking, as a distinct sub-niche within adventure tourism, represents an accessible and environmentally sustainable activity that appeals to a wide range of travellers seeking immersion in natural landscapes (Steyn et al., 2021). Unlike many other adventure activities that require advanced technical skills or involve significant physical risk, hiking typically demands minimal equipment and can be undertaken by individuals of varying fitness levels. This inclusivity makes it one of the most widely accessible forms of outdoor recreation (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). It is enjoyed across a variety of settings, including urban green spaces, national parks, and remote wilderness areas (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). The push-and-pull motivational theory offers a robust theoretical lens through which to interpret hiking behaviour within soft adventure tourism contexts. This is demonstrated by recent studies (Mansueto et al., 2024; Potti Nair & George, 2023), which affirm its continued relevance in understanding tourist motivations in a post-pandemic world. Push factors include a desire for wellness, escape from routine and personal enrichment, which resonate with hikers' internal motivations (environmental engagement and psychological restoration). Pull factors refer to destination-specific attributes such as scenic beauty, walking trail accessibility, cultural significance, and safety infrastructure, all of which play a role in drawing hikers to particular routes (Mansueto et al., 2024). Applying this framework facilitates an important evaluation of how psychological motivations and external trail characteristics interact to shape hiking decisions within South Africa's soft adventure context. Compared with more extreme adventure activities, such as mountain biking or paragliding, hiking offers a more contemplative and socially engaging experience. It tends to emphasise environmental appreciation, wellness, and cultural engagement over adrenaline or high-risk excitement (Williams & Lew, 2021). This orientation makes hiking especially attractive to those in search of restorative, educational, and meaningful experiences, aligning strongly with the principles of soft adventure tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

When comparing hiking destinations, several criteria come into play, such as landscape diversity, trail accessibility, supporting infrastructure, safety provisions, and overall visitor experience. Internationally renowned trails, such as the Milford Track in New Zealand and the Inca Trail in Peru, exemplify the global appeal of hiking and contribute substantially to local economies. However, they also raise concerns about overcrowding, environmental degradation, and the carrying capacity of sensitive ecosystems (Mokhele & Sibanda, 2021). As such, there is an increasing scholarly focus on sustainable trail management to balance economic gains with ecological integrity (Ndlovu et al., 2023). South Africa offers numerous world-class hiking opportunities, notably in the Drakensberg Mountains (KwaZulu-Natal), Table Mountain National Park (Western Cape), and along the Garden Route (Western and Eastern Cape). These trails feature a diverse range of landscapes, from alpine meadows and coastal cliffs to indigenous forests, and attract both domestic and international tourists (Steyn et al., 2021). Proximity to urban centres enhances accessibility for day hikers and short-stay visitors (Mthembu & Dube, 2023), while the integration of many trails within protected areas ensures strong conservation oversight (South African National Parks, 2022). In comparison to long-distance trails in North America, such as the Appalachian Trail or Pacific Crest Trail, South Africa's trails are generally shorter but no less significant. Trails such as the Otter Trail are internationally renowned for their scenic value and biodiversity (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). These routes align well with the principles of soft adventure tourism, offering physical activity, personal enrichment, and environmental education without necessitating extreme endurance or risk (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

Several interrelated factors, including trail maintenance, safety infrastructure, interpretive signage, and community involvement, shape the quality of the visitor experience. Sites that incorporate sustainable tourism practices such as low-impact infrastructure, waste management systems, and local employment tend to deliver more meaningful and responsible experiences (Ndlovu et al., 2023). For example, many South African trails offer interpretive centres or guided experiences that deepen visitors' understanding of local ecology and heritage (South African National Parks, 2022). Despite these strengths, some trails face persistent challenges, including overcrowding, erosion, inadequate signage, and insufficient safety protocols (Mokhele & Sibanda, 2021). Scholars have emphasised the need for integrated visitor management strategies and targeted education campaigns to safeguard both ecological assets and visitor satisfaction (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). South Africa's hiking assets stand out due to their biological richness, cultural heritage, and scenic diversity. For instance, the Drakensberg is celebrated not only for its dramatic peaks but also for its San rock art and endemic species (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Table Mountain offers urban residents and international visitors alike a chance to explore nature trails within a metropolitan setting,

reinforcing its appeal as a sustainable soft adventure destination (South African National Parks, 2022). Compared to more remote or infrastructurally challenged destinations, South African trails benefit from an established framework of conservation and community involvement. This facilitates safe, inclusive, and educational experiences that resonate with ecotourists, cultural travellers, and wellness seekers (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). The country's integrated focus on nature conservation and community-based tourism also positions hiking as a strong contributor to the goals of sustainable tourism and local empowerment (Ndlovu et al., 2023).

Benefits of hiking

Hiking, as a sub-niche of adventure tourism, offers a wide range of benefits that extend beyond recreation to encompass educational, cultural, environmental, and socio-economic dimensions (Steyn et al., 2021). One of the most significant advantages is its potential to function as an educational platform that fosters environmental awareness and conservation ethics among participants (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). As hikers move through diverse landscapes, they encounter unique ecosystems, flora, and fauna that serve as natural classrooms, enhancing ecological literacy. Interpretive signage and guided educational programmes further enrich the experience, promoting experiential learning and environmental consciousness (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Hiking also facilitates cultural and historical engagement, particularly when trails traverse areas of cultural significance or heritage value (South African National Parks, 2022). For instance, trails featuring indigenous rock art or historic landmarks provide opportunities for tourists to interact with South Africa's cultural heritage in meaningful ways (Steyn et al., 2021). This enhances intercultural dialogue and encourages a deeper appreciation of the region's historical narratives and identity (Mthembu & Dube, 2023), aligning hiking with the broader aims of heritage tourism (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Studies show that hikers' experiences, such as joy, restoration, and aesthetic appreciation, are closely linked to features such as ecosystems, wildlife, and cultural heritage, fostering a sense of attachment and responsibility toward these places (Chai-et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Moira et al., 2021). It can be argued that hiking's ability to promote environmental stewardship is especially relevant within the context of sustainable tourism. This engagement can lead to increased community-led conservation initiatives and wider public support for protected areas (Ndlovu et al., 2023). In this regard, hiking fosters a sense of personal responsibility and care for natural heritage, particularly when supported by eco-friendly infrastructure and educational interventions (South African National Parks, 2022). Additionally, hiking is strongly associated with health and wellness benefits. It promotes physical fitness, mental well-being, and stress reduction through prolonged exposure to natural settings (Williams & Lew, 2021). As a low-impact activity, it can be integrated into daily life or utilised in community-based health programmes to encourage active lifestyles across age groups (Steyn et al., 2021). Hiking also supports social cohesion by facilitating family outings, community walks, and group excursions, which help strengthen interpersonal relationships (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

Lean (2022) argued that wellness, education, and personal growth are key principles of transformative tourism, where deep personal change occurs through meaningful, often nature-based travel (Amaro et al., 2023; Pung et al., 2020). It can be argued that hikers who engage with cultural and ecological narratives potentially experience an increase in their environmental appreciation, shifts in worldview, self-identity and improved well-being. Zhao & Agyeiwaah (2022) and Bueddefeld & Duerden (2022) state that transformative travel experiences trigger deep emotional, cognitive, and behavioural change. Economically, hiking can generate substantial benefits for local communities, especially when integrated into community-based tourism models (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Trails located in rural or previously marginalised areas can create employment opportunities, stimulate local entrepreneurship, and encourage the production and sale of local crafts and services (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Active community participation in trail maintenance, guiding, and service provision further ensures that economic benefits are more equitably distributed (South African National Parks, 2022). Moreover, hiking can catalyse environmental advocacy and policy engagement. First-hand encounters with issues such as habitat loss, pollution, or the visible effects of climate change may prompt hikers to support environmental campaigns and conservation legislation (Steyn et al., 2021). This grassroots-level advocacy can influence broader societal attitudes and policy decisions concerning environmental protection (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). Finally, hiking provides an opportunity for spiritual reflection and psychological restoration. Its immersive qualities foster solitude, mindfulness, and introspection, benefits increasingly valued in today's fast-paced and urbanised world (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). These qualities contribute to personal growth, making hiking a meaningful and transformative activity for many travellers (Williams & Lew, 2021).

Challenges of hiking

Despite its many benefits, hiking as a tourism activity also faces several challenges that can impact the environment, local communities, and visitor experiences. One major challenge is environmental degradation

caused by overuse of popular trails, which can lead to soil erosion, vegetation damage, and disturbance to wildlife habitats (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). Managing the balance between access and conservation requires careful planning and maintenance, which can be resource-intensive for managing authorities (South African National Parks, 2022). Safety and health risks are also concerns for hiking tourism. Injuries, dehydration, or encounters with dangerous wildlife can pose threats to inexperienced hikers or those ill-prepared for trail conditions (Williams & Lew, 2021). The remoteness of some hiking areas can delay emergency responses, highlighting the need for adequate visitor education and reliable communication infrastructure (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Another challenge is the potential cultural commodification of heritage sites along trails. While hiking can promote cultural engagement, there is a risk that the authentic significance of cultural landmarks may be diluted or exploited for commercial gain, which can alienate local communities and diminish the visitor experience (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Socio-economic disparities can also limit who benefits from hiking tourism. Without equitable community involvement, economic gains may be concentrated among external operators rather than local populations, potentially exacerbating inequalities (Steyn et al., 2021). Furthermore, seasonal fluctuations in visitor numbers can create unstable income streams for those dependent on hiking tourism.

Liu et al. (2025) report that quantitative research predicts that, due to rising temperatures and shifting humidity, hiking participation and duration will decline in most regions, with over 90% of cities in one large study expected to see negative effects by 2050 and 2080. Steiger et al. (2022) and Dube & Nhamo (2020) state that mountain and protected areas are especially vulnerable, facing threats such as more frequent extreme weather events, loss of flora and fauna, and damage to infrastructure, which can disrupt both the environment and visitor activities. These changes, according to Dube & Nhamo (2020) and Pröbstl-Haider et al. (2020), may force tourists to alter their destinations or activities and adaptation opportunities, such as rebuilding trails, improving hazard protection, and implementing early warning systems, which are often costly and may not fully compensate for lost experiences. Adaptive management strategies are essential, including technical solutions, improved infrastructure, diversification of tourism offerings, and enhanced communication and education for both visitors and businesses (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2020; Dube & Nhamo, 2020; Kutlu et al., 2025).

Future trends and opportunities in hiking

The future of hiking as a sub-niche of adventure tourism is likely to be shaped by several emerging trends that reflect changing traveller preferences, technological innovation, and an increasing emphasis on sustainability (Steyn et al., 2021). One notable trend is the growing popularity of solo hiking, driven by a desire for personal growth, self-reliance, and flexible travel arrangements (Williams & Lew, 2021). Solo hikers often seek immersive and introspective experiences in natural settings that align with the broader wellness tourism movement (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). With improvements in trail safety and digital navigation tools, solo travel has become more viable, creating opportunities for communities to benefit from increased visitation (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Sustainability is also expected to become increasingly central to hiking tourism. Travellers are becoming more environmentally conscious and are choosing destinations and trails managed in accordance with sustainable tourism principles. These include eco-friendly infrastructure, minimal environmental impact, and active community involvement (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). The adoption of eco-certification schemes and responsible tourism guidelines further supports the credibility and appeal of sustainable hiking experiences (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). Research by Zoysa (2021), Lukoseviciute et al. (2024), and Cerveny et al. (2021) highlights that community collaboration and participatory management in trail development, such as eco-cultural trails and forest-based ecotourism, enhance both conservation outcomes and local livelihoods, making these destinations appealing to responsible travellers.

Technological innovation will also play a transformative role in the hiking experience. Developments such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) have the potential to enhance interpretive content along trails, allowing hikers to engage with ecological, geological, and cultural information in dynamic and interactive ways (Williams & Lew, 2021). Wearable technology and mobile applications can improve safety through GPS tracking and health monitoring, making hiking more accessible to diverse groups (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). In addition, digital platforms that support trail planning, environmental education, and social networking can help build online hiking communities and promote responsible behaviours (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Another key trend is the integration of hiking within the broader wellness tourism sector. As mental health and holistic well-being become more prominent in tourism choices, hiking is increasingly recognised for its therapeutic potential. Destinations may develop wellness-focused trails that incorporate meditation zones, yoga spaces, or healthy food offerings to meet this growing demand (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022). The rise in multi-generational travel also calls for more inclusive and accessible trail designs that cater to families, children, and older adults (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). The

concept of *digital detox* is gaining popularity, with many travellers intentionally disconnecting from technology to reconnect with nature. This has implications for trail design and visitor management, as destinations may designate *tech-free zones* or promote offline activities that foster mindfulness and presence (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Such experiences offer a counterbalance to the always-connected lifestyles of many urban travellers, enhancing the restorative value of hiking (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

Climate change and environmental resilience will also influence the future of hiking tourism. There will be a growing emphasis on low-impact, high-value experiences that safeguard fragile ecosystems while delivering educational and memorable visitor encounters (Steyn et al., 2021). Furthermore, hiking may play a role in climate education by exposing travellers to the realities of environmental change and mobilising support for conservation efforts (Ndlovu et al., 2023). In summary, the future of hiking in adventure tourism will be shaped by developments in solo travel, sustainability, digital technology, health and wellness integration, and climate resilience (Williams & Lew, 2021). These trends reflect a wider shift toward personalised, ethical, and environmentally responsible travel. As destinations respond to these shifts, hiking is poised to remain a relevant, inclusive, and transformative tourism activity that aligns with global goals for conservation, well-being, and sustainable development (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Hiking, as a sub-niche of adventure tourism, plays a vital role within the broader tourism landscape by offering accessible, sustainable, and enriching outdoor experiences (Steyn et al., 2021). Its appeal lies in its unique capacity to connect travellers with nature, cultural heritage, and opportunities for personal growth, qualities that firmly position it as a quintessential soft adventure activity (Mthembu & Dube, 2023). With minimal equipment requirements and inclusivity across varying fitness levels, hiking stands out as both a sustainable and widely accessible form of tourism (Jansen & van der Merwe, 2022). The reviewed literature underscores hiking's potential to foster environmental education, cultural engagement, and local community involvement. Trails frequently function as platforms for promoting ecological literacy, cultural identity, and conservation values through signage, guided experiences, and community-driven initiatives. These immersive elements help visitors better understand local ecosystems, appreciate cultural heritage, and adopt responsible travel behaviour (Ndlovu et al., 2023). Simultaneously, hiking supports physical activity, mental well-being, and social connectedness, offering valuable public health benefits (Williams & Lew, 2021). Economic contributions are also well-documented. Studies by Hasan (2024) and Bhatta (2023) highlight how trails in locations such as Indonesia's Mount Merbabu and Nepal's Annapurna region generate employment, support entrepreneurship, and increase local incomes through multiplier effects. However, concerns about uneven benefit distribution and economic leakage remain, requiring targeted policy and local governance responses.

Considering the future shape of hiking's evolution, several key trends are expected, which include the growing popularity of solo hiking, the demand for more sustainable and wellness-oriented travel, and the adoption of digital tools such as augmented reality and mobile applications that enhance interpretation and safety (Mthembu & Dube, 2023; Williams & Lew, 2021). Sustainability remains at the core of hiking's appeal, with responsible trail management, climate awareness, and inclusive tourism practices essential to securing its long-term viability (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022; Ndlovu et al., 2023). As such, hiking is increasingly positioned as a reflective, health-conscious, and forward-looking form of adventure travel. The benefits of hiking include educational, cultural, environmental, health, and economic dimensions, which underscore its value within sustainable tourism development (Steyn et al., 2021). As the global tourism sector adapts to new challenges and expectations, hiking is poised to remain a meaningful, adaptable, and impactful activity. Advancing these strengths through innovation, inclusive planning and community engagement will be vital to ensuring hiking's continued relevance in future tourism strategies (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022; Williams & Lew, 2021).

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